

# LAS VEGAS FIRE DEPARTMENT STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

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| <b>INCIDENT COMMAND</b>  | <b>PUBLIC INFORMATION POLICY</b> |
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## I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Purpose:** It is the policy of the Las Vegas Fire Department to establish and maintain a positive operating relationship with the news media.

The purpose of the Public Information Division is to assist the Fire Chief Staff Officers, and Incident Commanders with providing correct and factual information to the general public, other government agencies and/or departments and the news media when requested. The Public Information Officer (PIO) will coordinate the movement of the media on any fire department property, including emergency incidents, and release information approved by the Fire Chief or Incident Commanders.

During times of fires, disasters and emergencies, the news media and general public will be relying on the fire department for information, such as guidance during an emergency evacuation or flood. This may be done in conjunction with other city/county/state/federal agencies, such as the Emergency Management Agency or the Environmental Protection Agency. The PIO is responsible for providing emergency information (whether direct to the news media or through another cooperating agency as prescribed in disaster plans) in a correct and timely manner.

The Public Information Division is an important part of the Incident Command System (ICS) and Integrated Emergency Management System (IEMS). This directive is designed to establish procedures for all Fire-PIOs of the Las Vegas Fire Department.

- B. Scope:** All Fire Department Personnel
- C. Author:** Public Information Officer of the Fire Chief's Office.
- D. Definitions**

The following is a list of definitions used by the Public Information Division:

Public Information Officer: There are three levels of Public Information Officers within the Las Vegas Fire Department: Staff PIO; Acting PIO; and Temporary PIO.

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Staff Public Information Officer: The Staff PIO is an appointed position within the Office of the Fire Chief. The Staff PIO will coordinate all public information, public relation and media relation programs and procedures used by the Fire Department. The Staff Public Information Officer is the official spokesperson of the Fire Department. The Staff PIO reports directly to the Chief of the Fire Department.

Assistant Public Information Officer: Acting PIOs are specially trained personnel of the Fire Department who assist the Staff PIO. In the absence of the Staff PIO, an Acting PIO will coordinate all public information, public relations and media relations programs and procedures used by the fire department. Acting PIOs report directly to the Staff PIO or the Fire Chief/Incident Commander.

Temporary Public Information Officer: A temporary PIO is **ANY** member of the Fire Department who may come in contact with the news media, or may coordinate any public information, public relations program or procedures used by the Fire Department. **ALL** members of the Las Vegas Fire Department will receive training to perform the duties of a Temporary PIO.

City Public Information Officer: The City PIO is assigned to the City Manager's Office and coordinates all public information programs of the city. The City PIO will be the liaison between the Fire Department and City Hall in matters of public information.

Fire Department Property: Property of the Las Vegas Fire Department includes all buildings and grounds used by the City or Fire Department, all vehicles used by the City or Fire Department and the buildings, grounds, airspace, waterways, public streets/sidewalks and any other area which is under control of the Fire Department (e.g.: all incidents, emergencies and disasters.)

Joint Information Center: A center consisting of public information officers from a number of agencies working together on the same project, task or incident.

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Media Information Center: When the Emergency Operations Center is activated, the Media Information Center will be located in the office of the Fire-Public Information Officer and will coordinate and disseminate all information from the EOC.

Press Area: The designated press area for the Fire Department will be the lobby of Fire Department Headquarters. This area will be used to disseminate information to the news media when the EOC is activated or when the Fire Chief deems necessary.

## II. RESPONSIBILITY

It is the responsibility of all Chief Officers, Company Officers, Incident Commanders, Division Heads, and Supervisors to ensure that this policy is maintained.

## III. PROCEDURE

- A. The Fire Chief will appoint a Staff Public Information Officer for the Las Vegas Fire Department. All information released to the general public and news media pertaining to the Las Vegas Fire Department should be approved by the Fire Chief or the Public Information Officer.
  - 1. All requests for information from the news media should be directed to the Staff PIO. The Staff PIO is the primary designated spokesperson for the Las Vegas Fire Department.
    - a) Communications personnel should notify the Staff PIO, as soon as possible, of the following types of incidents:
      - (1) Emergencies that require a full second alarm and above.
      - (2) Injuries or deaths related to fire and/or fire products.
      - (3) Injuries or deaths of Fire Department personnel, or major damage to fire department property.

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- (4) Confirmed train derailments, aircraft crashes, or hazardous materials incidents in which the Fire Department is involved.
  - (5) Any other incidents considered significant or newsworthy in which the Fire Department is involved.
  - (6) Any incident in which the Las Vegas Fire Department is providing assistance outside the city, excluding automatic aid responses.
  - (7) If the Incident Commander, Fire Investigator, Company Officer or any member of the news media request the Staff PIO to respond.
- 2. In the event that additional PIOs are needed, Acting PIOs will be used. Acting PIOs are certified personnel, who have completed a prescribed training program and certification approved by the Chief of the Fire Department. All action taken by any Acting PIO must be coordinated by the Staff PIO or the Fire Chief. If an Acting PIO has been temporarily assigned to Staff PIO position, they shall perform all the necessary duties required of that position.
- B. All request for media ride-a-longs on fire apparatus or to stay on fire department property for extended amounts of time, to do a story, must first be coordinated and approved by the Staff PIO. Once approved, it is the responsibility of the Company Officer of the unit the media representative is assigned to, to ensure that the media representative follows all fire department rules, regulations and policies. A release form should be filled out and signed and forwarded to the Staff PIO for record keeping.
- C. Requests or arrangements for visits to Las Vegas Fire Department property by political candidates, research groups, news media, and the like should be coordinated with the Staff PIO **prior** to the planned visit.
- D. All members of the Las Vegas Fire Department will be required to attend a mandated four hour media relations orientation class. Personnel who have not completed the prescribed training will not be permitted to make statements or be interviewed by the news media.

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- E. When a news conference is being given by the Fire Department, the Public Information Officer of the Fire Department will be in charge of the event.
- F. If a Public Information Officer responds to an incident and they are interviewed by the media **OR** if an incident is of great significance or newsworthy, a prepared hardcopy newsrelease should be prepared and disseminated to all the media outlets using one of the assigned fax machines.
  - 1. When a news release is made, copies should be made available, either in hard copy or electronically, to all Fire Department personnel, City of Las Vegas Public Information Committee, and the City PIO Office. This is to ensure that everyone is aware of the same information that is being released to the media, in case the media does a follow up in some other fire department division or city department.
- G. No preferential treatment will be accorded any representative of the news media. This statement should not be construed to prohibit initiative reporting nor does it require notifying all news media prior to the release of information.
- H. It shall be the responsibility of every member of the Las Vegas Fire Department to protect the reputation of the Fire Department and the City.
- I. INFORMATION RELEASE
  - 1. Names of victims and/or fire department personnel will only be released to the news media by the Staff PIO.
    - a) The names of deceased or injured civilians or Fire Department personnel should not be used over the radio or released to the media except by the Staff Public Information Officer.
  - 2. The PIO must exercise care, common sense, and discretion to avoid rendering statements and/or information which if later quoted

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may create a misunderstanding or compromise the effectiveness of the Las Vegas Fire Department.

- a) The causes of fires, and any other incident should not be released to the news media without approval of the Incident Commander. It is better to make sure of the exact cause than to make a premature statement and have to retract it later. If the cause is not known, or you are not sure: it is **UNDER INVESTIGATION**.
  - b) Fires which are suspicious in nature should not be referred to as "arson" unless ruled as an arson fire by members of Fire Investigations. Elements of a suspicious fire should not be released to the media and/or public unless approved by a member of Fire Investigations. All information released by Fire Investigators to the news media should also be sent to the Staff PIO as soon as possible.
3. All prepared news releases, news advisories, and press statements will be issued by the Staff PIO.
- a) In matters of Administration, request for information from the news media should be coordinated and released by the Staff PIO. (This pertains to issues of policy or of a sensitive nature, not routine. If personnel are not sure of the qualifications of the request, they should be forwarded to the Staff PIO for review.)
4. Damage estimates (in dollar amounts) will be determined by Fire Investigators or the Incident Commander.
5. When the Las Vegas Fire Department Bomb Squad is operating on a call, requests for information from the media should be directed to the representative in charge of the agency that requested assistance from the Bomb Squad (e.g.: ATF, FBI, IRS, Metro Police, other Fire Departments.)
- a) Incidents involving drug labs or suspected drug labs should be handled by the Public Information Officer of the

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Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Requests for information from the news media should be directed to the LVMPD-PIO.

- b) In regards to traffic accidents, information about the circumstances of the accident should be disseminated by a spokesperson from the law enforcement agency in charge of the accident. Fire Department personnel will refrain from speculating on how the accident might have occurred or discuss circumstances of the accident with the media.
  - c) In reference to aircraft crashes, automobile accidents and train derailments, only information concerning rescue and fire protection procedures should be discussed with the media. Items such as the what caused the accident, who is at fault and the like should not be discussed. The media should be referred to the investigating agency that will be responsible for the incident.
- 6. In the event of a fire death, only the approximate age and gender of the fatality should be released to the media on the scene. The name of the victim should not be released. Release of the victim's identity will be released by the Clark County Coroner's Office.
- 7. Information that should NOT be released by any member of the Fire Department to the news media or general public shall include the following:
  - a) Prior criminal record, character or reputation of any accused person of a crime.
  - b) Criminal justice information from the Nevada Crime Information Center or the NCIC.
  - c) The existence of any confession, admission of guilt or the failure or refusal by the accused to make a statement.
  - d) Any opinion of department personnel regarding the guilt or innocence of any accused.
  - e) The identity, testimony or credibility of a prospective witness.

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- f) Any opinion of agency personnel regarding the merits of any incident or case or quality of service rendered.
  - g) Any information concerning the identity of individuals under the age of 18 years.
  - h) Residence or personal phone numbers of Fire Department personnel.
  - i) The identity of fatalities or critically injured without the notification of the next of kin.
  - j) The release of information received from other fire or law enforcement agencies without the authorization to release that information.
- 8. Information that shall be released only by the Fire Chief or the Staff PIO with approval of the Fire Chief includes the following:
  - a) The name of any Fire Department personnel involved in any accident or incident that the fire department is investigating.
  - b) The names of Fire Department personnel or any statements made regarding disciplinary action against any member of the Fire Department.
  - c) Official mugshots or photographs made by the Fire Department.
  - d) Statements of department policy governing specific organizational changes (general organizational policy is public information).
  - e) Newsreleases or information released concerning the Fire Department through the convening of a press conference.
- 9. If the news media requests immediate information from Communications, the following information can be released immediately:
  - a) Type of call, nature of call received.
  - b) Location or address of the incident.
  - c) Units responding to the incident.
  - d) Current action being taken by the Fire Department (e.g.: Investigating, Extinguishing, Evacuation, etc.)



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10. The Incident Commander, Communications personnel, or other Fire Department personnel should make available to the Public Information Officer the following information:
- a) Type of call, nature of the call.
  - b) Location or address of the incident.
  - c) Name of occupants and/or owner.
  - d) Type and size of structure and contents.
  - e) Damage estimate.
  - f) Cause of the incident.
  - g) Current action being taken by the Fire Department.
  - h) Casualty(s)'s name, age, address and extent of injuries.

**J. PROCEDURES FOR INTERVIEWS**

1. When being interviewed by the media, all Fire Department personnel will present themselves in a professional manner.
  - a) They should not wear sunglasses, chew gum, eat/drink food products or use tobacco products.
  - b) The use of slang, profane or obscene language is strictly prohibited.
2. Fire Department personnel giving interviews to the news media should state only the facts. Causes, damage estimates and the like should not be released to the news media unless the facts are absolutely known and confirmed.
3. Fire Department personnel will refrain from expressing personal opinions or feelings or from any type of speculations. Personnel should not make statements they wouldn't want quoted. Personnel can be held accountable and liable for their statements to the media. Discretion should be used in every case.
4. Descriptions of activities should be elementary in nature, and plain English, rather than Fire Department terminology. (For example: The public may relate to a "water cannon" instead of a master stream or deluge gun, or "ladder truck" instead of truck company.)

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5. Whenever another member of the fire department, other than the Public Information Officer, makes statements or is interviewed by the news media, the Staff PIO should be made aware as soon as possible so the same information can be released to the other media sources, or if the news media calls back for more information, the PIO will be aware of the event.

## K. EMERGENCY RESPONSE

1. When the Las Vegas Fire Department responds to an incident the following procedure shall be used.
2. Command will be responsible for the management of public information at an incident. As soon as practical, the Incident Commander will establish a Public Information Division, if needed. The effective establishment of this division will relieve the Incident Commander of the need to deal directly with the media during critical command stages and will provide (and structure) the standard information the media will require to accurately report the situation.
  - a) Prior to the arrival of the Staff or Acting PIO, the Incident Commander, if unable to handle the PIO duties, may assign a Temporary PIO. The assigned Temporary PIO will retrieve an ICS/PIO vest from the Battalion Chief's vehicle and begin to gather information which will provide the media a basis for a news story. The Temporary PIO will station himself/herself in a readily visible and accessible location near the Command Post to meet and provide information to the media representatives.
3. The PIO will report to the Incident Commander upon arrival at the incident, determine the status of the Public Information Division, establish a Public Information Division if Command determines one is needed, or assume responsibility of the Public Information Division if one has already been established and is in operation.
4. During an incident, the PIO shall be under the direct supervision of the Incident Commander.

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5. The Incident Commander will be responsible for the Public Information Division at incidents they are in charge of. Once the incident has been terminated, the Staff PIO will be responsible for all public information requests concerning that incident after termination. Any request from the news media for information about any incident, after it has been terminated, shall be directed to the Staff PIO.
6. At the incident scene, the PIO should position their division as close to the Command Post as practical. Access to the PIO division by the media, and their safety in relation to the incident, should also be taken into consideration.
7. Identification of the Public Information Division at an incident shall consist of the following:
  - a) A rotating white beacon light on top of the vehicle used by the PIO.
  - b) An orange "Media" flag for the parking area for media vehicles.
  - c) Orange cones may be used for establishment of a media vehicle parking area.
  - d) White "Public Information" barricade tape may be used to designate a media holding area.
8. Public Information Officers at an incident shall wear all approved fire department turnout gear in addition to the red LVFD PIO Incident Command vest that is carried in each command vehicle.
9. PIOs working at an incident should have all necessary equipment to perform the function properly. This includes fire department pager, fire department cellular phone and fire department portable radio.
10. When performing the duties of Public Information Officer on the fireground, the radio identifier shall be "PIO." If more than one PIO is working at an incident, PIO-1, PIO-2, etc. shall be used, with PIO-1 used by the PIO in charge.

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11. Concerning news media representatives at the scene of fires, disasters, emergencies, or other incidents where the Las Vegas Fire Department is the lead agency, the following shall apply:
- a) Access to fires, disasters, emergencies or other incidents under the control of the Las Vegas Fire Department and to which the general public has been excluded by the establishment of police, fire or other designated lines, shall be granted to news media representatives with valid news media identification cards or other verifiable press credentials, unless the news media representative's presence is reasonably likely to jeopardize department operations or there is reason to believe that their safety maybe compromised or in danger.
  - b) News media representatives are not permitted to interfere with, obstruct, or hamper any operations the Fire Department. The presence of a photographer or a reporter at an incident and the taking of pictures or asking of questions relative to the incident do not of themselves constitute interference and should not be restricted, except in accordance with section A above.
  - c) News media representatives may be asked to show their press credentials to Fire Department personnel or other Public Safety agency personnel at the perimeter of the incident.
  - d) News media representatives shall be allowed to photograph and report events that transpire on public property unless their actions significantly jeopardize current Fire Department operations.
  - e) Fire Department personnel should not restrict a news media representative from taking pictures or asking questions, even though members of the Fire Department may disagree with the nature of the pictures or questions, unless their actions are clearly interfering with an ongoing incident or investigation which is under control of the Fire Department.

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- f) When news media representatives are present either on their own initiative or by being granted access to an area under Fire Department control, Fire Department personnel shall not attempt to restrict any of their actions, unless their actions are clearly interfering with an ongoing incident or investigation which is under control of the Fire Department.
- g) News media personnel who violate any laws or interfere with the operations of the Fire Department will be dealt with in the same manner as any other violator.

- 12. Public Information Officers are not permitted to give permission to the media to gain access to private property. If the media wishes to film or photograph damage inside of a structure, they will have to get permission directly from the property owner, after fire department operations are completed. If they are able to obtain permission during an incident, they may enter the private property, under escort by a Public Information Officer, with approval of the Incident Commander.

**L. LARGE DISASTER**

- 1. In the event of an emergency and/or disaster which requires that an emergency notice be released to the public, it should be done with accuracy and in a timely manner. The notice should be coordinated through the Fire Department's Emergency Management Director, with approval by the Fire Chief or designee. All notices will be sent in **hard copy via fax machine** to all media sources. The paging system should also be used to advise the media to be ready to receive emergency information via their fax machine.
- 2. In the event of a large scale incident where the Emergency Operations Center has been activated, the following procedures will be used:
  - a) The Public Information Office will be used as a joint Media Information Center (MIC) for the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The PIO office is quipped with all the necessary media and news communications equipment.

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- b) If a Press Area is needed while the EOC is in operation, the Lobby of Central Fire Station (Headquarters) will be used. Media representatives should only be permitted in the lobby area on the first floor.
- c) Entry/Exit into Central by Fire Department personnel and other officials into the EOC should be done through the rear door next to Station 1 so they do not have to enter the Press Area.
- d) The media should be permitted to use the visitor parking spaces to park their news units, especially if a live interview is needed.
- e) If an interview is to be given to the media, a hard copy newsrelease should first be generated and reproduced, so it can be handed out at the same time the statement is made during the press conference.
- f) A white board, taken from the trunk of the PIO vehicle, with stand should be set up in the Press Area to display current information and to relay information to the media such as; next briefing time, casualty count and the like. The numbers displayed on the board will be the official number or tally.
- g) A podium and microphone should be set. A portable media hook-up station for lights and audio should also be set up for the media to hook into.
- h) At least two Fire Inspectors should be on duty in the Press Area while any news conference is in session to provide security and to ensure the safety of all visitors while in the building.
- i) Tours of the EOC are permitted by the news media, if approved by the Manager of the EOC. If approved, the PIO will escort the media at all times while they are in the EOC.